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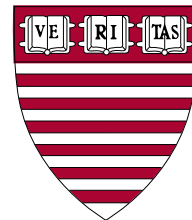
The Rise and Fall of the Televised Political Convention

by

Zachary Karabell

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INTRODUCTION

Live broadcast coverage of the national party conventions has been a feature of U.S. presidential campaigns since 1948. The broadcast tradition could possibly end in the year 2000.

"We're headed directly to cable," said a disillusioned Tom Brokaw after the 1996 conventions.

The networks are concerned with the conventions' shrinking audience. It has declined sharply since the 1960s and reached an all-time low in 1996. The networks also object to stylized conventions of the type that the Democrats and Republicans staged in 1996, when nearly every minute was choreographed and nearly every statement was scripted. ABC's Ted Koppel stormed out of the 1996 Republican convention, claiming that the event offered no controversy and thus no news.

The parties have a different view. They contend that they deserve the opportunity, once every four years on the occasion of the selection of their presidential nominee, to present themselves at length and in their own way to the American people. The parties also say that network policies dictate the convention's new form. When the networks ended their gavel-to-gavel coverage in the 1970s, they increasingly used the conventions as a time to showcase their own talent. The parties responded in the only way they thought sensible: they began to lay out their conventions on a minute-by-minute timeline, seeking to coordinate their key messages with those moments when the cameras would predictably be aimed at the podium.

In "The Rise and Fall of the Televised Political Convention," Zachary Karabell traces the history of the broadcast conventions, building a strong case for the proposition that the parties and the networks together have brought the conventions to a low ebb.

Whether the networks or the parties are chiefly responsible for the conventions' declining stature is not the issue here. The critical

fact is that self-interested parties and self-interested networks got caught in what Sissela Bok calls a "vicious circle" that, in the end, has made the voters the real losers. They no longer have the option of watching at length the vigorous give and take that characterizes party politics at its best.

In his wonderfully lucid and richly descriptive paper, Karabell takes the reader through what he describes as the three phases of the broadcast conventions: 1952–1968, when they were "shared political events"; 1972–1988, when they became "stage-managed events"; and 1992–1996 when they were "over-mediated" by both the candidates and the networks.

Karabell is one of the country's most promising young historians. A recent Harvard Ph.D., he has decided, at least at the start of his career, to pursue his profession as a full-time writer based in New York rather than as an academic historian. He is currently writing a book on the 1948 presidential campaign.

Karabell is too insightful an analyst to claim that the televised convention can somehow be restored to its former prominence. Yet he recognizes that more than a link to our political past would be lost if the networks drop their live coverage of all but the acceptance speeches. He suggests that party leaders and network executives, and ultimately the American people, could benefit from a rethinking of the purpose and coverage of the conventions. And it is certainly the case that those in politics and in the news media, as well as interested citizens, could benefit from a reading of Zachary Karabell's carefully crafted paper.

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The Rise and Fall of the Televised Political Convention

by Zachary Karabell

In September of 1996, journalists took stock of the recently completed Democratic and Republican presidential conventions. The verdict was nearly unanimous: the conventions had become political set-pieces devoid of meaningful content. Half-way through the Republican Convention in San Diego, Ted Koppel and the “Nightline” crew left, claiming that “they were bored and had better things to do.”¹ Koppel himself remarked that the media had managed until that point not to notice what the conventions had become. “Somehow we have very little trouble the rest of the year seeing through this kind of thing, when Hollywood tries to do it with a movie, or a factory with some new product,” he observed bitterly.² One reporter expressed the view of many when he called the conventions “scripted infomercials.”³ Another wrote a post-mortem report of what he called “the last gasp of the last living dinosaur in the New World.”⁴

Already in 1988 and 1992, the crescendo of criticism was mounting. Ratings had been on a steady skid for years, and between 1992 and 1996 they were down by nearly 15 percent, and viewership was down as much as a third.⁵ 1992 was considered a ratings debacle by network news executives, and at the conclusion of the Republican convention, ABC News President Roone Arledge gave serious consideration to pulling ABC out of convention coverage altogether.⁶ While prime-time coverage was scaled back by all three networks to one hour a night in 1996, the 1996 conventions provoked many more calls for the networks to stop covering the conventions live and in prime-time.

Yet, for all of the disenchantment with the modern convention, the media in general—and the producers of network news in particular—took little responsibility for the apparent decline. Judging from the comments made by those working in network news, the responsibility for the degeneration of the convention into an “infomercial” lies almost entirely in the lap of the politicians and party managers.

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“At bottom,” said David Broder, himself both a print and television journalist, “politics is about resolving conflicts. That requires rolling over the opposition or compromising with. Either way, voters didn’t like it. The more the party showed its conflicts, the fewer votes it got. The politicians, being smart, began to move the conflicts out of camera range.” The result was stage-managed conventions that approximated conflict free zones. “Instead of doing their own business, the politicians decided to produce TV shows—contrived narratives heavy with emotion.” The irony, Broder concluded, “is that television, which drove politics out of the conventions and encouraged the politicians to convert them into TV entertainment, now complains about the result.”⁷

There is still considerable debate over whether this devolution of the political convention matters. There is no question that people are less interested than ever in viewing the conventions on television. Fewer and fewer people each year are watching the conventions, and networks are devoting fewer and fewer hours to convention coverage.

The era of the televised convention began in 1948. At the time, only eighteen cities in the United States had television stations, and only nine of these were on the coaxial cable that carried the signal from the conventions in Philadelphia. In addition, fewer than 350,000 Americans owned television sets.⁸ 1952 marked the first time that a significant portion of the electorate watched the conventions on television. The networks estimated that 65 million people, out of a population of slightly more than 150 million, watched all or part of the conventions that year.⁹ The networks telecast 57.5 hours on the Republican convention, and 61.1 hours on the Democrats, and each household watched on average 10 to 13 hours. Dedicated to covering the conventions “gavel-to-gavel,” the total hours of convention coverage actually surpassed that length of the convention proceedings, once commentary and analysis were added. In 1980, CBS and NBC finally abandoned “gavel-to-gavel” coverage, and with each subsequent convention, the networks devoted increasingly less air-time to the proceedings.¹⁰

By 1992, the networks broadcast fewer than 8 hours of coverage, and though the actual

length of the proceedings had gone down precipitously, that 8 hours still represented a fraction of the coverage forty years earlier. More troubling perhaps, the percentage of households watching declined from its high of more than 80 percent in 1952 through 1960 to less than a third of households in 1992 and 1996; some estimates place the figure at 10 percent. For the eight nights of the 1996 Republican and Democratic conventions, an average of 20 million Americans a night tuned in, out of a population of more than 250 million. Between 1992 and 1996, overall convention ratings dropped 12 percent.¹¹

But do these developments matter to the health of American politics? Is society harmed by the fact that people no longer watch conventions that are themselves neither longer treasure-troves of information nor high-political dramas in which candidates vie for selection and delegates contest issues? The scholarly literature is full of interesting correlations between trust in government, faith in the political system, and attitudes towards news on television.¹² But scholars have yet to discern clear causal links between declining convention viewership and declining confidence in both presidential elections and the political process in general.

Yet, that doesn't mean that there is no reason for concern. Given the journalistic outcry and the public apathy that greeted the past few conventions, it would seem that the decline of the televised conventions at the very least reinforces tendencies that are already there and may create even more apathy, disgust, cynicism, and public suspicion of the political process. And if a healthy democracy depends in part on an informed, engaged electorate, then these developments should be taken as a troubling sign.

Furthermore, the institution of network news, both as a business and as culture, has played a significant role in this decline. Certainly, the change in the nominating process in the 1960s from a convention-based nomination to a primary-based nomination dramatically changed what took place at a national convention. But the change also involved network news and how the news organizations shaped the politics of conventions. Looking at the story of conventions from 1952 to 1996, one can see two forces at work: the evolution of network news and the transformation of the nomination process. These converged and interacted in unforeseen ways to bring about the demise of the convention as a meaningful public event. This paper examines how that happened, and it

offers some thoughts about the consequences of these historical developments.

Phase One: 1952–1968

In 1952, somewhere between a third and a half of the country watched the conventions. While high proportions had listened to the previous five conventions on radio, the rapid explosion of television viewership made the 1952 convention a bona-fide *shared political event*.

In subsequent years, some have expressed regret that with the onset on television, the public began to receive less hard-news content than they had in the days of newspapers and radio. Richard Salant, the former president of CBS News, once said that the news in a television report would only fill five columns of the *New York Times*. But as Richard Wald, formerly an executive at ABC, observed, "Salant neglected to add that there were pictures too. The pictures convey a form of information that we find it difficult in our own lexicon to describe."¹³

Along with changing the nature of the information transmitted, television brought far more people into the convention than ever before.¹⁴ Or to be more precise, it gave far more people the illusion of participation in the convention. Until the advent of radio, the convention truly was an intra-party event. The wider public had no first-hand knowledge of what went on in the convention hall, and high rates of illiteracy meant that even newspapers conveyed events to a limited segment of the population. Radio allowed people to witness, albeit aurally, what was transpiring in the convention hall. But television added a dimension that radio could not. By transmitting both sound and pictures, television helped transform the convention into a spectacular event, one part political process, one part circus, one part down-home revival meeting. Early television corporations, and Radio Corporation of America in particular, focused on the conventions in their advertising for television sets. "Buy a television, watch the conventions," they promised. And people did just that.

In the first televised conventions, large numbers of people watched, and for longer periods. In the 1950s, they watched in groups, clustered around a neighbor's television set. The conventions were a communal experience. "With the aid of television," blared an ad for the RCA, "we had what amounted to the biggest town meeting ever held . . . sixty million people had front-row seats and got a better picture of what was going on than any delegate or any reporter on the convention floor."¹⁵

The presence of television cameras and the knowledge that a large audience was watching began even in 1952 to change the dynamics of the convention itself. As the Republicans convened in Chicago (and both conventions chose Chicago in part to make sure that all sections of the viewing public could watch evening events near to prime viewing hours), the supporters of Eisenhower challenged the supporters of Senator Robert Taft over the credentials of delegates from Texas. Taft backers wanted the debate over the so-called "Fair Play Amendment" conducted in private, away from television cameras. Eisenhower insisted that the contest be waged in public. The Fair-Play amendment won; Eisenhower's delegates were seated, and his nomination was secured.

Eisenhower's camp was able to use television to force open the proceedings to their advantage. After all, in the words of one commentator, "to be against fair play on television was like trying to commit grand larceny in broad daylight."¹⁶ The very public-ness of the televised convention began to alter how parties conducted their business and where.

In 1952, 1956, and even in 1960, network news was still growing into its role as the primary vehicle through which information about the convention was conveyed to the American public. As television news moved out of its infancy, newsmen and producers started to think about their own role in the conventions. That ranged from the mundane issues of finding the best camera angles to more substantive ones such as how to analyze what was taking place on the convention floor.¹⁷

The conventions also started to become "the Olympics of newscasting," as many referred to it. The men who did the on-air commenting for the conventions received incredible publicity, and anchoring or even reporting from the convention floor helped launch the careers of Chet Huntley and David Brinkley on NBC and Walter Cronkite on CBS. The rivalry between CBS and NBC News was at its most acute during convention years, and executives at each network competed aggressively to defeat the other in ratings and prestige. As one member of the CBS team commented, "The desire was to beat NBC, not to cover the Convention in its most thoughtful and original way as the story developed. The goal was to beat NBC to get a bigger audience and critical acclaim."¹⁸ ABC lagged far behind in audience share and influence, and it was not a significant player in convention coverage until the 1970s and the arrival of Roone Arledge.

The internecine competition between NBC and CBS had as much to do with the emphasis the networks placed on the conventions as the actual events. Even early on, there were indications that audience attention waned during the more procedural aspects of the proceedings. Yet, each year, the networks placed more cameras on the floor, hired more commentators, and spent more time on-air discussing the goings-on than the time speakers at the convention spent giving speeches.

In part as a way of drumming up audience share, the networks continued to "sell" the conventions to the public as a viewing event of epochal importance. According to a Brookings Institution study in the 1950s, "the television industry, in its advertising and public statements, widely hailed the conventions as the greatest political show on earth, a special event of magisterial proportions."¹⁹ Yet, it is possible to be overly cynical about the networks' motivation. Yes, they wanted to generate public enthusiasm so that people would watch, and each network wanted people not to watch the other networks. At the same time, even network executives and advertisers were not immune to the pull of the democracy of which they were a part. Even granting the high-levels of domestic propaganda that characterized the first decades of the Cold War, the American public evinced a high-level of interest in and engagement with the political process, and people seemed to treat presidential elections as deeply meaningful events with profound consequences for the nation. Network executives and corporate advertisers played on this interest, but they also shared similar sensibilities.

After 1956, the networks began to play a more active role in working with party leaders to reshape the convention process in order to suit the needs of television. Soon after the conclusion of the conventions in 1956, Sig Mickelson, vice-president of CBS News, stated bluntly that long, drawn-out nominating speeches and procedural statements would have to be phased out in the interest of keeping the events interesting to a television audience. "Television," he said, "is a uniquely live medium. We believe in live coverage where live coverage is warranted. But we will not waste the viewer's time with hour after hour of deliberations in which the significant developments are only a small part of the proceedings."²⁰

In part as a result of network news imperatives, the 1960, 1964, and 1968 conventions were shorter, more tightly and precisely scheduled and

more choreographed. Of course, in both 1964 and 1968 the best efforts of the party leaders to pre-empt the content of the conventions went awry, and severely so for the Democrats in 1968.

As one response to the heated battle between the networks, newsmen looked for anything that might draw audiences to them and not to the other network. Sometimes, that meant deploying prestigious anchormen and commentators. At other times, and more significantly in terms of the evolution of the televised convention, the networks sought out conflict where none was immediately evident. In their analysis of viewing habits, the networks determined that television audiences, in their passive role as watchers of images unfolding on the screen, respond to conflict and tune out when there is little action. Speeches and delegates milling around the floor of the hall don't make for drama, no matter how important the overall event. In response, networks tried to generate drama, by showing scenes of disorder and presenting "genuine emotion."²¹

During the Democratic convention in Atlantic City in 1964, the networks gave extensive coverage to the dispute over the Mississippi delegation, highlighting the divisions rather than the unity of the party around Lyndon Johnson. At the Republican convention at San Francisco, the networks lavished attention on those insurgents who made a last-ditch effort to stop Goldwater's nomination. This effort was led by Governor William Scranton of Pennsylvania, and it had no chance of halting Goldwater's coronation. Nonetheless, in the words of Reuven Frank, soon to be made chief of NBC News, "despite its hopelessness, the Scranton challenge would give us something to cover, a story to report." On television every day before the convention, NBC presented pictures of the anti-Goldwater forces trying to moderate the language of the party platform. So enraged were Goldwater's supporters that when he was finally nominated, they vented their anger on the newscasters. In a now-famous moment, NBC announcer John Chancellor was arrested and carried from the convention floor, saying "This is John Chancellor, somewhere in custody."²²

The desire of the networks to provide drama and conflict helped create the fiasco of the 1968 Democratic convention in Chicago. The actual confrontation between police and protesters in Grant Park and on Michigan Avenue was yet another manifestation of the divisions that rent the country in that year. The factionalism of the Democrats in the wake of

Johnson's withdrawal from the presidential race, Robert Kennedy's assassination, and the split between Humphrey and McCarthy guaranteed that the convention would be acrimonious.²³

To an already volatile mix the networks added a predilection for conflict. The protesters, recognizing that tendency, timed the most active demonstrations to be most visible to news cameras; there were even instances of staged rioting, where protesters re-enacted scenes for the cameras.²⁴ Equally problematic was the decision of the networks to inter-cut images of the proceedings in the hall with protests outside, even though those protests were not taking place live when they were shown. News producers argued that the protests were essentially taking place simultaneously to the convention, even if the specific scenes that were juxtaposed to the nomination had occurred several hours earlier. Reuven Frank defended his network's decisions, saying that of 35 hours of coverage, "exactly sixty-five minutes was devoted to the demonstrations."²⁵

Whether or not the networks unfairly distorted the coverage, the parties concluded that such visible evidence of disunity projected into tens of millions of homes could damage a presidential candidate's chances for election. The parties therefore resolved never to allow a repeat of 1968.

At the same time, and less noticed in all the uproar, ABC had made a decision that would prove to be of major importance. Mostly for budgetary reasons, ABC decided not to cover the Chicago convention "gavel-to-gavel." In 1968, ABC televised one-quarter of what it had in 1964, even though the 1968 conventions actually ran longer. Yet, in 1968, with entertainment programs providing the lead-in to ABC's convention coverage, the network's ratings more than doubled from four years before and made ABC competitive with CBS and NBC for the first time. ABC never returned to gavel-to-gavel coverage, and by 1980, the other two would follow suit.²⁶

Phase Two: 1972–1988

1972 saw the birth of what might be called "the stage-managed convention."²⁷ Both the Republicans and the Democrats convened in Miami. The site was chosen in no small measure because access to the hall was over a narrow causeway. That allowed strict controls over who could get near the event, and decreased the likelihood that there would be a repetition of the state of siege that existed in Chicago.

The Republicans micromanaged every detail of their convention, with the aim of presenting a predetermined image of the party and its candidate Richard Nixon. Each night was scripted by party officials and copies of the script were provided to the networks, complete with minute-by-minute details of music, applause, and the movements of the speakers. Also included was a candidate film, during which the hall lights were dimmed. The 1964 and 1968 conventions also included films, some containing tributes to the Kennedys at the Democratic meetings. But in the 1970s, these films took center stage, and by running them in prime-time with lights dimmed and no other activity, the parties effectively forced the networks to air them in full.²⁸

By the 1970s, the televised convention had morphed into something very different than it had been in 1952. Both the television time and the overall hours consumed by official sessions shrank, from nearly 60 hours in 1952 to between 10 and 20 in the 1980s. While the networks began to scale back from gavel-to-gavel coverage, the quadrennial event solidified as a bona-fide news event, and as a major determinant of the pecking order amongst network news division.

But the convention changed in other ways as well, and for reasons not related to television. After 1952, the role of the convention slowly shifted. Though no one knew it at the time, 1952 was the last time the nomination of a presidential candidate went to more than one ballot. The convention had until that time been the place where party leaders gathered to select the man who would represent the party in the general election. After 1952, and then particularly after 1968, the convention ceased to be the place where candidates were chosen, and the locus of decision moved from the convention to the presidential primaries.²⁹

After 1968, the Democrats instituted a series of new rules that further stripped the convention of its power to select candidates. The McGovern-Fraser commission proposed changes to make the process more democratic, and one result was to place the primaries in the forefront of the selection process, to alter the way delegates were chosen, and to limit their ability to depart in any way from their pre-convention pledges of loyalty. Some of these developments had already taken place, but as of 1972, they were firmly ensconced in intra-party politics.

Once the convention was no longer a deliberative body, the possibility of a certain type of drama was removed. Candidates arrived to be

crowned, not chosen, and delegates arrived to celebrate the coronation. The convention was still important as a galvanizing force for the party, and as a way to rally the party faithful around the nominee, but that was more meaningful for the party than for the general public. And that meant that the viewing public had less reason to watch.

Two separate factors, therefore, converged in this period to produce conventions that were increasingly devoid of substantive debate or process. One was the desire of network news to provide conflict and entertainment in order to maintain ratings; the other was a change in the role of the convention in party politics. The first helped spur a reaction amongst party leaders to make sure that a unified front was presented at the convention; the second called into question whether the convention would continue to be a meaningful public event.

It certainly ceased to be an event that the public felt compelled to watch. Both coverage hours and ratings declined sharply after 1972, and public criticism grew louder. After 1980, the convention began to assume its current profile as an extended, four-day infomercial. People voted with their clickers. The networks started to look at whether covering the conventions was still merited, either by the audience share or by some residual notion of public good.

The Present Situation

In 1992, the story of candidate William Jefferson Clinton was presented in movie format to the delegates at the Democratic Convention in New York City. The film was titled "A Man from Hope," and it showed Clinton's rise from troubled Arkansas childhood to governor and now presidential candidate. So effective was the film at presenting Clinton in a golden, heroic light that the campaign decided to use it as an extended television commercial, which began running on television stations throughout the country as soon as the convention ended.³⁰

Also that year, *Washington Post* media critic Howard Kurtz observed that on the final night of the convention, "A remarkable thing happened: Bill Clinton was allowed to address the nation for 53 minutes without being interrupted by Rather, Brokaw, or Jennings." Kurtz continued, "The commercial networks tried to have it both ways. On the one hand, they declared party conventions a tired anachronism where no real news would be committed. . . . At the same time, ABC, CBS and NBC could not quite relinquish the prestige of covering

this quadrennial ritual. The result was perpetual punditry."³¹

The criticism that the networks over-mediate isn't confined to the conventions, but it is true that as the networks deemed less and less of the convention worthy of coverage, anchors, commentators and producers substituted their own voices for those of the public officials at the conventions. That has hardly kept people glued to their sets, but it has sustained the televised convention as network event even as it has lost much of its public significance.

Once again, is this a problem? Many would say no. For all the pointed observations at how bland the conventions have become and how little they seem to decide, they have continued to fill certain functions over the past twenty years. Primary amongst these is energizing the party; that is more of an "inside baseball" concern, but internal party unity is essential to victory in a presidential election, as is some enthusiasm for the anointed candidate. The public role of the convention in today's world is less easy to ascertain, but it would seem that at least through the 1980s, the televised conventions still swayed a portion of the electorate and was still perceived as a decisive moment in the election, even if fewer people bothered to watch the coverage on the networks.

From 1960 through 1984, somewhere between 31 and 17 percent of the electorate decided whom to vote for at the time of the conventions.³² Though the percentage has declined over time, a meaningful portion of those who vote make their decision as a result of the conventions. Even if the figure hovers between 10 and 20 percent of the electorate, in presidential races where the margin of victory is less than 10 percent, those figures suggest that the conventions can directly effect whether or not a candidate wins election.

In addition, there continues to be a "convention bounce" in the candidate's standing in the polls. After four days of intensive media scrutiny, a candidate almost inevitably enhances his public profile for the better. Voters tend to have a more positive image of the candidate in the aftermath of a convention, and they tend to say that they would be more likely to vote for the particular candidate.³³

A convention can also damage a candidate. In 1992, at the Republican convention in Houston, Pat Buchanan was given a prime-time slot, which he used to pronounce a culture war in America. The result was to turn many voters away from the Republicans and away from

President George Bush. While Buchanan's speech and the cultural conservative party platform solidified the partisan core of the party, the popular perception was that the convention alienated undecided voters.

Though network air-time has decreased drastically since 1952, and though far fewer people watch, it may be that knowledge of the conventions is still widely disseminated, first by the networks, and then through cable stations such as CNN, MTV, MSNBC, CNBC, and now Fox News; through local stations, which since 1980 have appeared at the conventions in ever greater numbers; through newspaper and magazine coverage of the speeches and goings-on; and even through references, soundbites, and jokes on the Tonight Show, the Late Show with David Letterman, and Late Night. So it may be that public awareness of the general contours of the convention is not appreciably less than it was when 100 million people were watching in the 1960s.

The fact that the convention, even in its stripped-down, infomercial incarnation, continues to influence voters and permeate public awareness does raise the question of whether the downward trend of the televised convention makes a difference. Compared to the pre-television era, far more people in today's world are aware of the convention's proceedings than was the case for most of American history in the convention era (that is, since the 1830s). Even with the substantial decline in television ratings, more people have access to the convention, and more people exercise that access, than at any point in the nineteenth or early twentieth century. And though the period from 1952 through the 1970s saw very high proportions of the public attuned to the convention, that period is clearly anomalous in the overall history of American democracy.

These caveats and questions can not be dismissed. It may be that highly public conventions with drama, conflict, and political substance are not essential to the health of American politics. It may be that the general disenchantment with conventions and with network coverage of them is simply one more manifestation of a general disengagement with politics, politicians, and network news.

But it may also be that the transformation of the televised convention is a problem in its own right. Though the convention fulfills some of the internal needs of the party, it has ceased to be the shared political experience that it was for at least 25 years. Watching television is not

necessarily any more of a passive process than attending a rally. At its height, the televised convention represented a national exercise in civics; it was one of the few moments in American life when tens of millions of people watched eight days of politics. Every four years, people sat down, literally, and tuned in with an eye toward selecting the president, delineating issues, and debating policy. If they were entertained in the process, by rousing speeches, confetti, bands, and all the sentimental trappings, so much the better. And the fact that they watched the same event, at the same time, with a limited number of commentators, meant that they were exposed to similar input. We can never know if they processed that input in similar fashion, no more than we can know if one person's experience of green is actually another person's experience of red. But it can be argued that the experience was shared in a much more basic and fundamental fashion than any political experience is shared today.

That then highlights the problem of lack of substance in the convention. Watching a Burger King commercial is also a "shared experience," and it may bring more people together for the Whopper. For a convention to be not just shared but constructively consequential, it must have some meaning, and for it to have meaning in a deliberative democracy, it must have content that reflects the variety of views present in a multifaceted populace of more than 250 million people. Because of the unintended consequences of an unforeseen convergence between network news and modern party politics, the convention has lost much of its meaning, and that, I believe, adds to the impoverishment of politics and contributes to the destructive distrust of government and politics that characterizes modern America.

In the past few years, there has been a growing chorus of writers, politicians, religious leaders, and scholars who call attention to the erosion of community in contemporary America. Robert Putnam, for instance, has argued that the declining membership in voluntary organizations signifies a declining sense of an "us."³⁴ Michael Sandel contends that we have ceased to function as a deliberative democracy, while others point to the disappearance of the proverbial "village" in American life.³⁵ In many of these accounts, and in Putnam most of all, television comes in for special opprobrium as a pernicious factor.

The fact that so many of us now watch so many hours of television every week might be a negative force. The time we spend glued to the

set might have been spent in years past talking with one another. But too many of these critiques overlook the capacity of television to be a constructive force leading to greater social cohesiveness.

For more than twenty years, the televised convention was a public event. People didn't just watch; they talked about what went on. In some respects, that continued a tradition of political engagement that had been typically present for decades before television. The televised convention may actually have allowed greater participation and more involvement in its first decades, especially if people congregated at houses of friends and family to watch, as seems to have been the case.

One possibility is that people watched and cared because the convention before 1972 actually decided something. Once the primary system superseded the convention as the means of selecting the candidates, the convention lost a considerable portion of its original purpose. But as the conventions of 1968, 1972, 1976, and even the Democrats in 1980 showed, it wasn't just the drama of selection that led people to watch or to care. In each of these years, the nomination was contested. Reagan may not have had a viable chance to supplant Ford in 1976, and Edward Kennedy knew that he had little hope of being picked in Carter's stead. But by challenging the nominee on substantive as well as procedural grounds, they made the convention a genuine forum for debate and disagreement. That created a sense that something substantive and significant was taking place in the political life of the nation. It may not have been the change of the convention's role, therefore, so much as the disappearance of substantive debate on issues that has led the public to turn away.

The devolution of the televised convention was caused by the convergence between network news and party politics. Television as a medium has the potential to bring people together in an active way, as the early conventions appear to have done. But network news, with its heavy emphasis on commentary and its emphasis on conflict interacted in the worst sort of way with the party politics. Party leaders, hoping to advance the chances of their candidate, took the cue from 1968 and tried to siphon conflict out of the public eye and away from the television camera.

This development was not inevitable. Had it not been for the peculiar history of the 1960s and early 1970s, that convergence may not have

happened. That in turn means that the future is not predetermined. It is possible to envision a televised convention that serves both the parties and the public. What is required is a commitment on the part of the parties to meaningful intra-party debate and a commitment by the networks to cover these debates without unnecessarily interjecting or overdramatizing in the interest of ratings.

Both party leaders and network executives need to sit down, preferably together, and discuss what the purpose of the conventions ought to be. If party leaders are adamant that the appearance of conflict harms them and that evidence of intra-party disagreements is to be kept out of the public eye, then it may be best if coverage were limited to acceptance speeches by the candidates. And if network executives assess the viability of coverage purely in terms of ratings and prestige, then they may well conclude that intensive television coverage just isn't worth the effort. But if party leaders and network executives consider the public good, different answers may arise. We may be some way from a reinvigorated convention, and in the current climate of network news and party politics, change doesn't seem particularly likely. But it is possible that the threat of the networks to cease covering the conventions will lead both the networks and the parties to give serious thought to redesigning a televised convention for the next millennium. Our democracy may not depend on it, but with the erosion of public engagement in politics already far advanced, the disappearance of the televised convention is something we simply can't afford.

Notes

1. David Broder, "Repairing the Political Conventions," *Washington Post* (September 11, 1996), p. 17.
2. James Bennet, "Few Tears for the Death of the Network Convention," *New York Times* (September 1, 1996), Sec. 4, p. 4.
3. Kenneth Garcia, "Conventions Look to be Irrelevant," *San Francisco Chronicle* (August 31, 1996), p. A1.
4. Martin Schram, "Next Conventions: Networks Pull a Fade," *Newsday* (September 4, 1996), p. A36.
5. William Clayton, "Dems at Least Win in TV Ratings," *Houston Chronicle* (August 31, 1996), p. 25; George Sketon, "Smoke Clears to Reveal a Lack of Drama," *Los Angeles Times* (September 2, 1996), p. 3.
6. Brian Donlon, "ABC's Arledge, Shaking Conventions," *USA Today* (August 24, 1992), p. 3D.
7. Broder, "Repairing the Political Conventions," *Washington Post*, op. cit.
8. Reuven Frank, *Out of Thin Air: The Brief Wonderful Life of Network News* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1991), pp. 8–10.
9. Gladys Engel Lang and Kurt Lang, *Politics and Television: Re-Viewed* (London: Sage Publications, 1984), p. 59.
10. Figures from Byron Shafer, *Bifurcated Politics: Evolution and Reform in the National Party Conventions* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), p. 280. Also, "National Nominating Conventions: Television Coverage and Viewership, 1952–1992," in Harold Stanley and Richard Niemi, *Vital Statistics on American Politics* (CQ Press: Washington, D.C., 1995), p. 69.
11. Tom Rosenstiel, *Strange Bedfellows: How Television and the Presidential Candidates Changed American Politics, 1992* (New York: Hyperion, 1993), p. 208; "Convention Ratings," *Minneapolis Star Tribune* (September 6, 1996), p. 20; "96 Presidential Campaign," *Houston Chronicle* (August 31, 1996), p. 25; Martin Schram, "Eye on the Media: Next Conventions Pull a Fade," *Newsday* (September 4, 1996), p. A36.
- 12.. See for instance, Joseph Nye, David King, and Philip Zelikow, *Why Americans Don't Trust Government* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997); Thomas E. Patterson, *Out of Order* (New York: Knopf, 1993); Shanto Iyengar, *Is Anyone Responsible: How Television Frames Political Issues* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991); Kathleen Hall Jamieson, *Packaging the Presidency: A History and Criticism of Presidential Campaign Advertising* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996); Lawrence Grossman, "Reflections on Television's Role in American Presidential Elections," Shorenstein Center Discussion Paper D-3 (January 1990).
13. Quoted in Martin Linsky, ed., *Television and the Presidential Elections: Self-Interest and the Public Interest* (Lexington, Mass.: DC Heath, 1983), p. 17.
14. Some have argued that television actually leaves viewers better informed than readers. John Robinson and Dennis Davis, "Television News and the Informed Public: An Information-Processing Approach," *Journal of Communication* (Summer 1990), pp. 106ff. Also see Marion Just, Ann Crigler, and Lori Wallach, "Thirty Seconds or Thirty Minutes: What Viewers Learn from Spot Advertisements and Candidate Debates," *ibid.*, pp. 120ff.
15. *New York Times* (August 19, 1952), quoted in Lang and Lang, p. 60.
16. Quoted in Lang and Lang, p. 65. Also see Judith Parris, *The Convention Problem: Issues in Reform of Presidential Nominating Conventions* (Washington D.C.: The Brookings Institution, 1972), pp. 62–64.
17. For first-hand accounts of the growth of network news and conventions, see Reuven Frank, *Out of Thin Air*, pp. 28–146; J. Leonard Reinsch, *Getting Elected: From Radio and Roosevelt to Television and Reagan* (New York: Hippocrene Books, 1988), pp. 61–126; Erik Barnouw, *Tube of Plenty: The Evolution of American Television* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975, 1982), pp. 110–135, 211, 271; Gary Paul Gates, *Air Time: The Inside Story of CBS News* (New York: Harper & Row, 1978), pp. 54–100. Also see Theodore White, *America In Search of Itself* (New York: Harper & Row, 1982), pp. 170–194; Richard Rubin, *Press, Party, and Presidency* (New York: Norton, 1981), pp. 147–180.
18. Robert MacNeil, *The Influence of Television on American Politics* (New York: Harper & Row, 1968), p. 112.
19. Quoted in MacNeil, p. 98. Also see William McAndrew, "Broadcasting the Conventions," *Journal of Broadcasting*, Vol. XII, No. 3 (Summer 1968), pp. 213–218.
20. Quoted in Reinsch, pp. 116–117.
21. Charles Fant, "Televising Presidential Conventions, 1952–1980," *Journal of Communication* (Autumn 1980), pp. 130–139.

22. This episode is recounted in Frank, *Out of Thin Air*, pp. 219–223; Reinsch, pp. 189–192.
23. There are numerous accounts of the 1968 convention. See for instance, Norman Mailer, *Some Honorable Men: Political Conventions, 1960–1972* (Boston: Little Brown, 1976), pp. 171ff; Jules Witcover, *1968* (New York, 1997).
24. Cited in Lang and Lang.
25. Frank, p. 284.
26. Shafer, pp. 266–271.
27. James Davis, *National Conventions in an Age of Party Reform* (Greenwood, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1983), pp. 200–202.
28. Ibid. Also, Mailer, *Some Honorable Men*, pp. 400–468; Hunter S. Thompson, *Fear and Loathing: On the Campaign Trail '72* (New York: Straight Arrow Books, 1973), pp. 337–390.
29. See Kathleen Kendall, "Communication Patterns in Presidential Primaries 1912–1996: Knowing the Rules of the Game," Shorenstein Center Research Paper R-19 (June 1998).
30. Stuart Elliott, "The Media Business: Clinton Video Now and Infomercial," *New York Times* (August 24, 1992), p. D7.
31. Howard Kurtz, "Perpetual Punditry: Analysis Unto Death," *Washington Post* (July 19, 1992), p. C7.
32. Davis, p. 196; Shafer, p. 156.
33. Shafer, pp. 234–235.
34. Robert Putnam, "Tuning In, Tuning Out: The Strange Disappearance of Social Capital in America," *PS: Political Science & Politics* (December 1995), pp. 664–683.
35. Michael Sandel, *Democracy's Discontent* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996); Hillary Clinton, *It Takes a Village* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995).